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The Civic and Cultural Role of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque

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Abstract

This paper highlights the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque (SZGM) in Abu Dhabi. The initial impression of features and activities shows that the mosque is being or should be a lighthouse for moderation and religious tolerance in UAE. The paper examines SZGM's role through using a theoretical framework that will be used as a criterion in order to identify the other aspects that the mosque needs strongly to do to be more activated. According to this framework the role of the mosque in general should have three main functions: monotheistic function, socialization function, and communicative function. Every function has sub functions. I try in this paper to examine the extent to which SZGM can perform its civic and cultural role.

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1. Introduction

Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque (SZGM) is an iconic Islamic edifice described by Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, as the most prominent architectural and intellectual landmark in UAE, for it brings together the authentic traditional spirit with modern and contemporary concepts. It's the third largest mosque in the world (22412 square meters) after the ones in Mecca and Madina in Saudi Arabia. Tractebel Alkhaleej of Belgium Company carried out the design in cooperation with the Syrian engineer Youssef Abdelke. Approximately 38 global companies and about 3000 took part in the construction of the mosque that took around 20 year. The late Sheikh Zayed, first president and founding father of the Emirates and their renaissance, laid the foundation stone of SZGM in 1996, and it was completed under the guidance of Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed AL-Nahyan, UAE president (Hillenbrand, 2012). SZGM demonstrated, as its features and activities showed since it was

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inaugurated in 2007 (Hillenbrand, 2012; Al-Sheikh, 2011; www.szgmc.ae), that it is intended to be a beacon of religious tolerance and moderate Islamic thought, and to be a minaret for the values and virtues which the late Sheikh Zayed inculcated in the Emirati conscience, according to Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed (Hillenbrand, 2012; www.szgmc.ae).

Throughout his life, the late Sheikh Zayed remained steadily committed to Quranic teachings which marked his childhood; the Quranic teachings that are characterized by Justice, moderation, compassion, tolerance and cultural interaction (Hillenbrand, 2012; www.szgmc.ae) that dispense with intolerance, narrow-mindedness, extremism, and fanaticism. It is no wonder that the afore-mentioned values were the foundation upon which the mosque was set. In addition to its intellectual and enlightening role, that is based on love and considerate of others (Hillenbrand, 2012). The thing that made everyone is working for this religious icon strongly motivated to follow the visionary ideas coined by the late Sheikh Zayed.

Sheikh Mansour Bin Zayed AL-Nahyan, Minister of Presidential Affairs, was quoted as saying that SZGM stands as the main mosque in UAE, a unique and newly- built architectural landmark that mirrors the spiritual features governed Sheikh Zayed's personality (Hillenbrand, 2012; Al-Sheikh, 2011). In the reflection of this statement by Sheikh Mansour, a question arises about to which extent the SZGM's cultural and civic role influenced Emirati people since its opening; i.e. a short period of time, nearly eight years. Another question emerges concerning the nature of future vision of the above-stated role. This question will be examined according to a theoretical analytical tool presented here as criterion, taking into account the strategic vision set by Sheikh Zayed for the mosque's future. To answer these two questions the paper makes use of an intellectual framework derived from Islamic vision, through which a theoretical analytic tool used as criterion to examine the other steps the Grand Mosque should undertake to activate its civic role more effectively.

2. The Intellectual framework

Masjid (Mosque) has a great status in Islam, it is viewed as house of Allah: a place where worshipers perform prayers, Mirror of Islam, and its first institution. Furthermore, it is usually referred to as parliament of Muslims, their university, their renaissance castle, and the crucible of their civilization. It is, also, considered the hub of social and political life, the base of Islam and one of its great pillars (AbulQaraya, 1994; Hillenbrand, 2012). The thing that explains the special place Masjid has in the hearts of Muslims.

Allah ordered Muslims to frequent Mosque. A Quranic verse reads: "... set your faces (toward him) at every place of worship" (Holy Quran, 7:29).

Almighty called for all human to regularly go to mosque in a verse that reads: "oh Children of Adam! Look to your adornment at every place of worship" (Holy Quran, 7:30). Metaphorically, He, also, made piety the foundation upon which mosque should laid: "There is a mosque whose foundation was set from the first day on piety, it is more worthy of the standing forth (for prayer therein)" (Holy Quran, 9:108) another verse reads that: "which then best? – He that layeth his foundation on piety to Allah and his good pleasure? (Holy Quran, 9:18) Key verses praised the mosque goes in the Holy Quran. One of these verses reads: "In it are men who love to be purified; and Allah loveth those who make themselves pure" (Holy Quran, 9:108).

"Prophet Mohammad, peace be upon him, asked believers to frequent mosque five times a day. Abdurrahman Ibn Awf (May Allah be pleased with him) reported: I asked the prophet (PBUH) which of the deeds is most loved by Allah? Messenger of Allah said: "performing prayer at its proper time" Abdullah Bin Maktoum, the blind companion of prophet Mohammad asked the messenger to grant him special permission not to attend congregational prayer but the messenger told him that: "I can't find excuse for you" (Hadith) the prophet urged his nation to attend Mosque constantly, saying: "When you notice a person regularly visiting a mosque, testify for him that he has faith" (Hadith). Another Hadith reads that: "going to mosque at dawn and dusk times could be equivalent of fighting evil in the way of Allah" (Hadith). The Prophet (PBUH), also, said, "Seven are (the persons) whom Allah will give Shade of His Throne on the Day when there would be no shade other than His Throne's Shade: A just ruler; a youth who grew up worshipping Allah; a man whose heart is attached to mosques.....etc." (Hadith).

Considering the civic standpoint, Mosques are two types: the gathering mosques, where Friday prayer is held, and the non-inclusive prayer gathering ones, which are limited to congregational prayer. The gathering mosques (referred in some Islamic literature as Friday mosques), in their turn, are of two types: Mosque to which university is

attached, and mosque with no university. People usually use the word "Masjid" to refer to mosque in which the congregational prayer held, while using the word "Jami'" for the gathering mosque (Hillenbrand, 2012). Hamid Rabie put the mosque to which university is attached under one name; that is "the civic university" (Rabie, 1979) such as; Cordoba Mosque and university, Al-Azhar Mosque and university, Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque and university, and Al-Zaytuna Mosque and university.

Historically speaking, Mosque came first. It was the crucible from which the university came into existence. Hence the latter is considered part of the mosque and one of its institutions, even if both are separated in some cases. For what matters here is the rule not the exception.

"The civic Mosque" played a key role in the Arab-Islamic civilization: being a hub of the intellectual, scientific, doctrinal and literary movements. This is why it is considered Mecca for Muslim students to acquire knowledge of different disciplines and branches. Therefore, the vision was so clear to the late Sheikh Zayed when he gave orders to build the Grand Mosque in order to be a welcoming Islamic space at which science and religion can coexist. Sheikh Zayed stated somewhere that: "science and Knowledge are much like light that brightens the life and future of human race. For science is an ongoing process, and we must adhere to its benefits, a fool person is he who thinks he gained the whole body of knowledge, and a wise one is the life-long learner, for we spend our entire life learning" (Al-Sheikh, 2011).

For Historical or architectural considerations, and sometimes for colonial ones, some gathering mosques of two types turned into museums and tourist attractions. The most prominent Mosques that set examples for that are the Mosques of Granada, Cordoba, and Seville, along with some other civic Mosques of Andalusia which turned into tourist attractions in the wake of Andalusia falling. To this, we must add that the urban sprawl, emergence of modern cities with modern mosques and facilities, and turning the old cities into small neighborhoods, made people abandon the gathering mosques located in ancient cities. Thus government passed resolutions of turning them into tourist attractions, or devoting them, at best, only for congregational prayers after, once, had been as busy as a beehive, teemed day and night with science workshops, scholars and students of all disciplines of study. Prominent examples of that are mosques of Islamic Egypt, first of all; 'Amr Ibn El-Aas Mosque, Ahmad Ibn Tulun Mosque, Sultan Hassan Mosque, Al-Hakim Bi-Amr-Allah Mosque and Sultan Al-Ghori Mosque, to say nothing of other mosque that exist abundantly in Al-Moez Le-Din-Allah street, and in the regions of Al-Darrasa and Old Cairo.

Given the difference between the mosque used as tourist attractions for already-stated reasons, and the mosque meet its civic role from the moment it was set, along with its functions as Mecca for tourists, this paper consider the latter as a third type of mosques where civic and tourist role come together. To name a few of these, Umayyad Mosques played, since its inception, a tourist role along with its other civic functions, as well as Aya Sofya Mosque, Sultan Ahmad Mosque in Istanbul, Al-Azhar Mosque, Al Hussein Mosque in Cairo, Al-Zaytuna Mosque in Tunis, Al-Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fes, and last but not least, the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi.

Generally speaking, it has been noticed that throughout Islamic history, as well as in the contemporary era, the tourist role of mosques is clearly connected with the so-called state-mosque. It is an obvious phenomenon that can be seen across the Islamic World from Morocco to Indonesia (Hillenbrand, 2012).

3. Analytical Tool

This tool examines the cultural role of mosque by analyzing it into three key functions; the monotheistic function, the socialization function, and the communicative function, out of which beget other functions to form an integrated and complicated system of functions. Together they constitute a general structure of the mosque's cultural role (AbulQaraya, 1994).

The monotheistic function; which is the mother of all, can be analyzed into three levels; the individual level, the nation level, and the global one, and thus it includes three secondary roles; the mosque role of instilling monotheism, and tolerant teachings of Islam deep in Muslim mind and soul; its role in unifying Ummah (Nation) (the congregational prayers, Friday prayer, 'Eid prayer, Haj, and Umrah); finally, the mosque global role (da'wa; inviting other people to Islam with wisdom and fair preaching) (AbulQaraya, 1994).

The socialization functions: Mosque serves as a center for educational activities, where Muslim gains knowledge and acquire high moral values that help cultivating good moral personality through a process of instilling positive

values, such as wisdom, moderity, and tolerance. Furthermore, it helps him be a real contributor to the civilizing process and producer of knowledge (AbulQaraya, 1994).

The communicative function: being a frequently visited worship place, Mosque plays a significant role in social communication. This role helps spreading love and tolerance among the people. It, also, makes Mosque a communication channel that connects the knowledge seekers with the world, and the ruler with the ruled, to say nothing of the mosque role as mass media platform characterized by honesty, beneficence, and calling for goodness and righteousness (AbulQaraya, 1994).

Thus, the paper tries to examine the extent to which SZGM met its cultural and civic role. For this purpose, the researcher used the above-mentioned analysis tool suggested in 1994 in a theoretical study aims at analyzing the role of mosque in the contemporary times, in comparison to the Islamic experience throughout history.

4. Activities and Events

On that basis, and in consideration of the short period of SZGM time, extended from its inception in 2007 until 2015; nearly eight years, we can shed light on the achievements fulfilled by SZGM, and consider, afterwards, the tasks to be achieved in the coming years to get in close touch with the civic guidelines set by the late Sheikh Zayed.

Considering the activities and events launched by SZGM center and its other sections, along with the decisions and strategic plans issued by board of directors (decisions are written in transparent way in the SZGM center's website lunched on 17 Mar 2011, it became clear, at first glance, that the officials administered the center found themselves on the right path, seeing that the mosque's message embodies Sheikh Zayed's vision in establishing and uplifting the mutual understanding between different cultures, and viewing the mosque as a forum aims to strengthen tolerance, modernity, between different cultures regardless to their cultural background and religious beliefs (www.szgmc.ae).

Thus, one can easily conclude that the vision Sheikh Zayed set for the SZGM message became a reality as a result of miscellaneous activities and events aimed to serve society intellectually by launching book fairs, lectures, forums; in additional to celebrating, social, and national occasions, and supporting the scientific research on all levels; authoring, translating, and publishing. In general, the activities and events held by SZGM center form the moment it was opened focused on many activities.

Receiving dignitaries from all over the world; kings, presidents, vice-presidents, prime ministers, senior clerics, military commanders, and many other officials from UAE, GCC countries, Arab countries, Islamic countries and the other countries of the World, all of whom highly appreciated and admired the aesthetic features of Islamic architectures as demonstrated in SZGM (www.szgmc.ae).

Secretary General of United Nations Ban Ki-Moon is one of world's most famous personalities who paid visit to SZGM (18 Jan 2012). Ban-Ki-Moon described the Mosques as a unique architectural pearl that adorns Abu-Dhabi and UAE, as it houses the largest dome, the largest chandelier, and the largest carpet in the whole world (www.szgmc.ae). Ban Ki-Moon remarked that with such great edifice, Abu-Dhabi become an enlightenment center of culture, civilization, and architecture both in the region and the world. He, also, described the mosque as a prominent Islamic edifice that stands as a model of engineering and architectural creativity, adding that it is not only a significant national achievement, of which UAE entitled to be proud, but also a global achievement and a great addition to the arts of world architecture (www.szgmc.ae).

International and locals delegations from different disciplines and domains, as well as students from different schools paid visits to the Mosque (www.szgmc.ae). Everyone came to learn about the aesthetic features of architecture exemplified by SZGM. The visits came in the course of cooperation and community partnership with local community organizations.

The SZGM center, also, sent invitations for world-winning children's book illustrators and authors, who draw illustrated pictures of the Mosque (www.szgmc.ae). The pictures were exhibited in a gallery, and later published in a book.

On the other hand, Board member of SZGM paid visits to other world institutions. The director of SZGM, for example, paid visit to cathedral of St. Anthony Coptic Orthodox Egyptians in Abu-Dhabi to offer condolences on the death of pop III; pop of Alexandria and patriarch of Saint Mark (www.szgmc.ae).

Another visit was made by board members of SZGM center to Islamic Culture Foundation in Spain (21 Sep 2010) in order to learn about the activities usually run by the foundation, and the role the latter played in launching more than 300 Andalusia exhibitions. Furthermore, the purpose of the visit was to make cooperation agreements with the Islamic Culture Foundation and other major Spanish institutions. Throughout the visits, several important issues were addressed; first of all the highly ranked Andalusian Garden Exhibition, the exhibition of Andalusian sciences, and the Exhibition of Andalusian Manuscripts, and the influence these manuscripts have on Spanish people. It was, also, discussed the possibility of borrowing them in order to be exhibited in SZGM (www.szgmc.ae).

Moreover, another delegation visited Hasan II Mosque in Casablanca. To this, we must add the mutual visits between SZGM and Al-Qarawiyyin University, which came in the course of cooperation between the two parties in the field of religious learning and scientific research. The thing that helps bringing Islamic thought and science up to great challenges. Thus meetings and workshops were held in Abu-Dhabi and Fez, during the years 2010 and 2011, with the university president, his deputy, and the director of master program to exchange views about establishing a religious institute and Quran memorization center in SZGM, and to consult about the issues of authoring, publishing, and probing the manuscripts (www.szgmc.ae).

Another delegation paid a health related visit to Al-Mafraq Center for Dialysis Medical Service, in Abu-Dhabi, in an effort to strengthen communication with various institutions of society (www.szgmc.ae).

SZGM center has been highly interested in statistics of Mosque visitor record. Half a million tourists visited SZGM during the first quarter of 2010, and about one million and 160 thousand visitors in the first quarter of 2011. The number of visitors and worshipers reached a total of approximately 4.000.685 visitors and prayers during 2012. Usually, SZGM receives from three to four thousand tourists a day, from all over the world. The number will go up to five to seven thousand tourist visitors in the peak time (www.szgmc.ae).

SZGM participated in several local international fairs and exhibitions. Locally, the Mosque participated in Abu-Dhabi International book fair for several consecutive sessions (www.szgmc.ae). It, also, participated in the exhibitions and forums of Arabian Travel Market over two years (2013 and 2014) in Dubai (12 May 2013 and 8 May 2014), where a scale model of SZGM had been displayed.

Internationally, SZGM participated within the wing of Abu-Dhabi authority for Truism and Cultural in ITB Fair in Berlin. This participation falls within the SZGM strategy and efforts to promote and strengthen intercultural communication among the people of different nations (5-9 Mar 2014). SZGM participated, also, in the 34th session of the World Travel Market in London (4-7 Nov 2013) exhibiting all prints issued by SZGM, which are, almost entirely, about Artistic and Scientific aspects of Islamic Architecture. SZGM, also, took part in the international tourism exhibition in France where a scale model of SZGM was displayed a long with all versions of Mosque prints (1 Oct 2013). Furthermore, SZGM participated in the following events; the third international Exhibition of Arabia Expo 2013 (June, 4, 2013); the eleventh sessions of the Russian-Arab Business Council in Len Expo Exhibition in St. Petersburg (June, 4, 2013); the International Investment and Trade Fair, China, (12-16 Sep 2012). SZGM, also, displayed a scale model of the Mosque in Zayed Center for Arabic Language and Islamic Studies in China (5 Jun 2012) (www.szgmc.ae).

In an effort to revive the civic role of medieval Islamic Libraries, but in a contemporary way, a library was established in SZGM with a material began with three thousand titles in a broad range of twelve active languages or more, along with collections of precious rare books, ancient documents and editions of Holy Quran printed in Europe during the period from 1537 to 1857 (www.szgmc.ae).

The library vision aims to revive the spirit of communication with people of other cultures. It also aims to avail of global knowledge, and to promote the scientific research; that once marked the Islamic Arab golden age, by providing the library with exceptional recourses allowing it to be, within the coming ten years, one of the top libraries, due to the plethora of recourses related to Islamic civilization as perceived by people of other cultures, in addition to becoming a highly ranked scientific center for inter-cultural dialogue, tolerance, and interaction between different civilizations (www.szgmc.ae).

The key goals of SZGM library lie in the following:

- Provide a great deal of diverse and organized intellectual productions.
- Make every effort to obtain and document the intellectual production related to Islamic culture, architecture, arts, and sciences written in active world languages.

- Provide and dispense contemporary knowledge and culture, and highly honour the Arab and Islamic heritage. In addition to take part in the process of reviving, revolutionizing, and studying it.
- Provide translation and academic materials in the field of Islamic and Arabic studies, in an effort to add most worth products to Intellectual and scientific research.
- Spare no effort to preserve the printed world heritage covers all fields of knowledge and science. The library, also, devote a great effort to organize activities and events aim at shedding light on the Islamic Arabic heritage, to say nothing of reviving and dispensing it.
- Organize activities and events in an attempt to promote the local society intellectually such as launching conferences, exhibitions, and celebrating religious event, as well as national, and social ones.
- Support the scientific and intellectual movement related to authoring, translating, and publishing.

Provide information and knowledge services, and exchange opinions and experiences with other institutions related to the same field, and, additionally, organize intellectual visits, besides exhibiting SZGMC prints and publications (www.szgmc.ae).

Within the framework of the electronic upgrading of services, the mosque joined in 24 Oct 2013 the Smart Governmental Initiative set out by Sheikh Mohammad Bin Rashid, where an integrated service system on mobile phones was offered. The system offered collection of applications and smart solutions for meeting the needs of mosque visitors and those dealing with its electronic site. These services include facilitating tours bookings for groups and travels companies from inside the country or abroad, facilitating the process of obtaining permits to photograph, make video records, or documentary films on the mosque for media agencies and TV channels, and providing librarianship services; like searching for reference information available in the centers library, book borrowing and reserving and contacting library staff for any useful inquires to the researchers (www.szgmc.ae).

The mosque participated in GITEX Technology Week in Dubai (session 33) by exhibiting the afore-mentioned electronic applications and smart solutions. A scale model of the mosque, a documentary film on the mosque and its founder; Sheikh Zayed, may Allah have mercy on him, and a special program that provided general information about the mosque; its architectural elements and electronic services were also exhibited. Moreover "Ascension of the stars" program (21 Oct 2013) unleashed by SZGMC in Nov 2010 was exhibited. It was the first electronic software in Arabic that made watching plants and stars on Smart phones and computers possible. On the other hand, the virtual tour in SZGM through the Net program carried out in cooperation with Google foundation was set out (2 Dec 2013) (www.szgmc.ae).

The mosque center has been keen to participate and cooperate with many local institutions and authorities; like UAE Wildlife Association and the World wide Fund for Nature, by taking part in the annual event of "Earth Hour" since 2010 with the aim of protecting the environment, reducing Global warming and reducing excessive consumption of energy through the symbolic putting off the mosque lights for a limited time. The center cooperated with Abu Dhabi municipality by taking part in the international "Water Day" held in Khalifa part in Abu-Dhabi under the slogan "water and energy" to acquaint the public with this global annual events (www.szgmc.ae).

SZGM center cooperated with Sheikh Mohammad Bin Khalid Al-Nahyan Center in form of offering a variety of programs events and daily activities in the mosque site in support of "Sheikh Zayed Bin Hazza Bin Tahnoon Prize Award for Leader Making, offered annually by that center. The award covers five major categories, the religious, social, educational and, media and personality development. The aim of the award is to explore the talented youth who are favored by leadership traits. SZGM engages in instilling the spiritual and moral values in the emerging generations through religious sermons that reinforce loyalty and the sense of belonging, deepen the concept of national identity, instill motives for voluntary work and learn the youth how to invest their time wisely. Events and activities were to commence directly after the Fajr (dawn) prayer (18 Jun- 24 Sep 2010). About 900 male and female students applied for the award out of which 45 highly skilled students were selected. It was agreed to adopt 50 students each year and to provide them with every kind of support and care through training and educational programs (www.szgmc.ae).

The mosque center held 'Multi-cultures, One Society' show in cooperation with Zayed House for Islamic Culture. It also participated in 'Abu Dhabi Reads' campaign (01 May 2013) in Zayed Higher Organization for Humanitarian and Special Need ', Bani Yas branch, which was organized by Abu Dhabi Education Council, to promote reading culture and create a generation well connected with the world of books and knowledge. The center signed a memo of understanding with the Ministry of Culture, Youth and local Community Development to achieve joint

cooperation for reinforcing and strengthening the positive communication between civilizations (04 Mar 2015) (www.szgmc.ae).

The mosque has, systematically, organized many cultural and religious lectures, especially under its program of "Al-zikr Al-Hakeem" (The Holy Quran). Such lectures come within a series of lectures held weekly in the line of the mosque religious, civic, intellectual and cultural role in community (www.szgmc.ae).

Beside all that, the center held four summer courses in Quran memorization, Al-Azan (the call for prayers), photography and wide range reading sessions, in which 400 male and female students from all over Abu Dhabi participated (4 Jul 2011). Such courses that the mosque offers aim at upbringing the youth within the ages 7-18 years on the values and teachings of religion. About 285 participated in the summer courses provided by the mosque, namely, Holy Quran memorization, photography and Arabic calligraphy (Jul-Sep 2012). A celebration to honor the students who participated in the two months courses of Quran memorization photography and Arabic calligraphy was held in 22 August 2012. The SZGMC organized also a course in the Holy Quran Tajweed (rules of recitation) (22 Apr 2013) in addition to providing courses in Quran memorization for adults, both men and women within "Al-Zikr Al Hakeem" program (25 August, 2014) (www.szgmc.ae).

On the other hand, a workshop and lectures were provided to private sector tour of tourist guides in the mosque (10 Oct 2011) to acquaint them with the special procedures and code of conduct during the tours. About 600 male and female guides registered in that workshop from various travel companies from all over the country in order to grant them official permits to organize tours in the mosque. Moreover, a workshop for travel companies representatives' entitled "Developed Visitor Services" to acquaint them with the standard operating procedures for visiting the mosque (15 Oct 2012) (www.szgmc.ae).

The 'Junior Cultural Guide' program was set forth to train school students to work in the tour guiding field during summer vacations (26 Jul-26 Aug 2015). The project was launched in the belief of the importance of supporting and preparing national workforce to work in this field. The program, also, came to emphasize the high cultural status of the mosque, and out of the concern in activating the concept of societal responsibilities through participating in developing the student skills and abilities (06 Aug 2014) (www.szgmc.ae).

The mosque center showed keen interest in organizing the photography competition called 'Spaces of Light', which is an international cultural heritage event to introduce photographer talents and skills in presenting the eminent beauties of Islamic architecture, documenting the distinguished architectural innovations displayed in this landmark, and showing its importance as a humanistic cultural and spiritual space. So far, five rounds of this contest have been organized, one each year since 2010 (www.szgmc.ae).

The center also made a light show in the mosque with lights technology to commemorate the 40th national Day (29 Nov-3 Dec 2011), which features twelve scenes. These were; the personal vision of Sheikh Zayed for the mosque; the prosperity and highly ranked inscriptions of the mosque, the construction boom, the Qibla Wall (the wall indicating the direction of prayer facing Mecca), Al-Mihrab (Prayer Niche), gardens beauty, palm trees, light and darkness 'mirage in the desert' where the mosque is transformed from a glass miniature model into a real construction, and the moon phases (www.szgmc.ae).

The center showed special interest in Ramadan activities and in serving the worshippers in the holy month "both people who fast and those who perform the prayer". In the forefront of such activities are taking good care in providing breakfast meals within the "Our guests those fasting" which is carried out annually as charity or almsgiving for the soul of late Sheikh Zayed. It is but customary within the "Ramadan Lamps" project to invite elite group of well-known "Qurraa" or reciters of the Holy Quran from all over Arab and Islamic World to lead Ramadan night prayer of Al-Taraweeh and Al-Tahajjud (www.szgmc.ae).

Among the mosque activities in Ramadan, there are junior courses in memorizing and reciting of the Holy Quran together with hosting young people who are willing to memorize the Quran and learn the rules of refined recitation. Furthermore, the mosque used to organize religious lectures and sermons in between Al-Taraweeh, in addition to hold conferences, celebrate "hold a vigil" Al-Qadr night [in worshipping], and host renowned scholars. It is usual to honor the participants in the activities and events of Ramadan, as happened in Ramadan of 2012 and 2013. The center also made all efforts in preparation for offering the highest quality of services and facilitations during Ramadan (19 Jun 2015), as a number of volunteers are usually received to provide all kinds of services and facilitations to the worshippers all days and nights of Ramadan (24 Jun 2015) (www.szgmc.ae).

The mosque organized many events including celebrating the International Environment Day, Al-Isra'a and Me'raj (the Prophet (PBUH) Night Journey to heaven) (5 Jun 2013), and participating in the celebrations of the 41st (29 Nov 2012) and the 42nd National Day (27 Nov 2013) (www.szgmc.ae).

In the late 2010, the mosque center carried out an opinion poll among a random sample of 500 visitors to the mosque from 20 countries including USA, Germany, Brazil, and Venezuela. The poll results showed that Abu-Dhabi is a city of tolerance, consolidation of coexistence values, respecting others together with their beliefs and cultures, withholding the fundamentals of true Islam to spread peace and security throughout the region and the whole world, and activating dialogue channel between nations (www.szgmc.ae).

The mosque center honored four travel companies for their adherence to the developmental procedures of the services offered to the mosque visitors (Karm Tours, Emirates Oasis Tours, World of Travel and Gulf Circle Tours) (01 Apr 2013) (www.szgmc.ae).

5. Qualities and Excellence

The mosque has obtained, in a short period of no more than eight years, many certificates of quality and excellence on the global scale. It was included in Guinness World records once the construction was completed as it features the world largest dome, carpet, and chandelier. The mosque, also, came second as the best landmark for the year 2014, based upon the assessment of the 'Advisor Trip' site, which is the largest travel site in the World, whose evaluation is based upon that of the visitors of touristic sites all over the world. The Emiratis consider such achievement as a source of pride for the Emirati state and its people (18 Jun 2014). The mosque was also selected among the top 25 touristic monuments in the world according to the classification done by the 'Advisor trip' site lately. Amongst those selected destinations were Taj Mahal in India, Petra in Jordan, and Machu Picchu fort in Peru (27 Jun 2013). Besides, the mosque was selected among the top 16 touristic destinations in the world according to another opinion poll carried out by "The Advisor trip" which included, among others, Sydney port in Australia, Coliseum in Italy, Eiffel Tower in Paris and the Table Mountain in Cape Town, South Africa (12 Feb 2013) (www.szgmc.ae).

On the other hand, two photographers won global prizes for photographs they took to SZGM. The first of these was a photograph of the SZGM, taken by the Kuwait photographer "Nada Ma'refi", won the bronze medal in the 7th Arabic and European Photography Festival in Hamburg, Germany, 2010. The second one was when the photograph of "Islamic Architectural art in SZGM by Thamer Bin Sa'd won the gold medal of Paris Global photography contest for amateurs and professional, In the amateur category, 2011 (www.szgmc.ae).

A delegation of the center signed a memo of understanding in Malaysia with the Malaysian museums for Islamic arts (15 Sep 2010) to exhibit a scale model of the SZGM in the museum. The model is the first one of a contemporary mosque to be exhibited in that Malaysian museum which was designed to be, restrictedly, about major ancient Islamic mosques that have influenced the development of Islamic architecture. The founder and chairman of the museums viewed SZGM as a splendid embodiment of modern Islamic architecture.

6. Applying the Criterion

Now, after this detailed exploration of the various events and activities of SZGM, since its establishment till the present time, they could be summed up in the following: holding congregational and Friday prayers, providing library services, receiving dignitaries, delegations and schools, sending invitations, participating in wings in various Arabic, Islamic, and global Fairs and exhibitions, cooperating with local and external institutions, giving lectures and training courses, running artistic contests and technical presentations, celebrating national occasions, organizing Ramadan activities; especially providing Iftar (breakfast); meals for fasting worshippers, holding Al-Taraweeh and Al-Tahajjud prayers [late night prayers], and Eid Al-Fitr prayers. In brief, it can be said that all these activities can be summed up in five main aspects of interest: the religious, architectural, tourist, cultural and media one.

If we looked deeply, into these activities in their five aspects, as we are about to apply the analysis tool previously mentioned at the beginning of this paper as a criterion that includes three general functions, we'll find that the existence of a university specialized in Islamic Sciences attached to the mosque, a college for Islamic and Arabic studies, or at least an intermediate collage for Islamic sciences will no doubt increase the efficacy of the

performance of the mosque three-faceted functions, namely, the monotheistic, educational and communicative function, such university or colleague would contribute in graduating generations of moderate Islamic thought, not only in the UAE, but in the whole Arabic Gulf region. Needless to say that the ongoing cooperation with other cultural and educational mosques would be very fruitful in this respect.

Thus, it seems crystal clear that the upcoming years need to be focused on the efforts of turning the mosque into a civic university. This paper, through a humble reading of the late Sheikh Zayed, may Allah rest his soul, sees that he was aspiring for SZGM to be one of the greatest civic universities in the Eastern part of the Arab Peninsula, where the values of moderation, tolerance, and broad-mindedness are taught, along with deepening the cultural and civic dialogue. He wanted the mosque to have its part in preserving Arabic Language. Not only has that, but the characteristics of the mosque qualifies it to be a great civic university in the Arab Gulf region at large.

In this paper I argue that the workshops, meetings and frequent dialogues with representatives of Al-Zaytuna and Al Qarawiyyin University reflect the concerns of the staff working in SZGM center in such a course of action. Moreover, the keen interest in supporting and extending a hand in financing other civic universities, as was the case when the mosque financed projects in Al-Azhar with the cost of about AED 250 million (29 Apr 2013), could constitute a good starting point for cooperation with Al-Azhar and making use of its long and established experience in various academic and cultural fields.

For this reason, this paper emphasizes the importance of communicating and cooperating with three civic universities in the Arab world; Al-Azhar university (361 AH) which has 62 faculties in various Islamic Humanities and physical sciences, Al-Qarawiyyin University (245 AH) that has 4 faculties or colleges; which are Al-Sharee'a college in Fes (Fe's), faculty of Arabic language in Morocco [Marrakech] faculty of the Religion Fundamentals in Tetuan and faculty of Sharee'a in Agghader; and finally, Al-Zaytuna University (79 AH) which has three institutions; the Higher college of Religion Fundamentals [Osoul] in Tunisia, the higher college for Islamic civilization, and the Islamic studies center at Al-Kairouan (www.szgmc.ae).

These civic universities represent moderate, non-extremist and enlightened Islamic thought, as their historic roles stand as a clear and true witness. It is also possible to call up and benefit from the experiences of Qordoba University, circles of group of students of religious teaching in Al Aqsa and the Umayyad, and other mosques. This is because the relationship between mosques and sciences, along with scholars, and students is a very strong and almost axiomatic one. Furthermore, it is considered the basis to build the Islamic civilization. And it is necessary to consolidate it through encouraging and supporting scholars and students alike with charity and Waqf money.

7. Conclusion

Sheikh Zayed grand mosque, within this ambitious future vision, could constitute a bulwark to protect and defend the Arabic language and Islamic both in UAE and the Gulf region. As the identity concept is based upon language and Faith, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed, the head of the state, call to make the year, 2008 as a year for the national identity in UAE could be viewed as going in the same direction. The same applies to what Sheikh Dr. Sultan Al-Qasemi; ruler of Sharjah, did when he commanded the establishment of a center for developing the Arabic language in his Emirate, so was the case with Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed, the crown prince in Abu-Dhabi, when he showed special interest in the Arabic Language in particular, as he inaugurated last March Sheikh Zayed center for Arabic Language and Islamic studies in Beijing, China (www.szgmc.ae).

The question that arises strongly here is, is it possible for Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque to be a greater civic university in the Gulf for teaching Islamic studies and the Arabic Language, and to constitute a strong bulwark for preserving the Arabic and Islamic identity? This paper sees that this is quite possible and is precisely what Sheikh Zayed, may Allah rest his soul, aspired. It behoves us all to go earth and sky to make that vision come true.

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